



Dr Che An and her husband have been Yuri's pillar of strength, helping him overcome his challenges. — Photos: FAIHAN GHANI/The Star

By SHEELA CHANDRAN
star2@thestar.com.my

Painting with different strokes

In conjunction with International Day of Persons With Disabilities celebrated earlier this week on Dec 3, *Star2* highlights a mother's dedication in nurturing her son's artistic skills.

FOUR of artist Yuri Azzari's artworks adorn Touch 'n Go cards. One depicts a mosque and another the verandah of a kampung house. The other two are abstract artworks, with bold strokes of colours. Yuri has also collaborated with local fitness apparel brand Fit Rebel; it has incorporated two of Yuri's artwork into its fitness workout pants.

The recognition of Yuri's talent means a lot to him and his family for it paves the way for the 28-year-old artist to be independent.

Yuri has moderate autism, and art is a powerful medium of communication for him.

"Since young, Yuri has always been interested in art. Besides painting, he enjoys sketching still life, buildings and nature. Although he is unable to communicate much, I am happy Yuri has found a way to interact through his artworks," says Yuri's mother Dr Che An Abdul Ghani, 56.

Yuri was diagnosed with autism at two years old. Dr Che An suspected something was amiss with her toddler son as he rarely

made eye contact and had delayed speech. She and her husband Yuri Zaharin took Yuri for testing, and the news that their son had autism altered the course of their lives forever.

"Like most parents, I was surprised to hear my eldest child's diagnosis. Once reality sunk in, I took it in my stride. My husband and I felt it was important to help Yuri overcome his challenges," says Dr Che An, a senior lecturer at Universiti Putra Malaysia in Serdang, Selangor.

In 2010, she completed her PhD in Communication Disorder, specifically in autism.

"I decided to pursue this subject matter for my doctorate because Yuri is autistic. It is something close to my heart and I wanted to learn more about social communication skills, language impairment and speech sound disorders in children with autism."

Although Yuri is a medium-functioning person with autism, his parents opted to bring him up as normal as possible. He went through the mainstream education system right up to Form Five. For UPSR, he scored 6Ds and 1C. In PMR, he made his parents proud by scoring a B for his history paper.

"While he struggled to communicate, he managed to get along well with his peers. School taught him independence and social skills," explains Dr Che An, who also enrolled Yuri for speech therapy, water therapy, art classes and occupational therapy to help him cope with and overcome his various challenges.

Yuri's range is wide – he does abstract painting and also figurative works. He paints nature as well as architecture. Raja Azhar, who has six students with autism, appreciates his special students' unique perspectives. He observes that they are inclined towards music and art.

"My special students are very smart and attentive. They have their own distinct and special imagination. Take Yuri, for example. He loves music and art. His musical knowledge is amazing; he knows singers from yesteryear to the present," says Raja Azhar, 68.

To increase her son's independence and to provide him with artistic training, she signed Yuri up for art lessons with artist Raja Azhar Idris in 2008. She hopes that some day Yuri would be able to earn an income through painting.

"Having Raja Azhar as a teacher has been a blessing. Through art lessons, Yuri learnt how to improve his manual dexterity and coordination, attention span and self-expression. The lessons have also developed in Yuri a sense of pride and accomplishment in his artworks," says Dr Che An.

Raja Azhar describes Yuri as an intelligent, loving, talented and creative student. "He is very confident with his lines and sketches. He can paint any subject matter. And his colour choices are beyond my imagination."

"My husband and I are thrilled with his progress especially as he moves towards independence," says Dr Che An. Under Raja Azhar's tutelage, Yuri has painted about 70 acrylic works.

His art pieces are proudly displayed in his parents' home. Some are abstract works while others are inspired by nature, with subjects such as volcanic eruptions, plant life and forests.

Some paintings are on easels, neatly arranged around the TV room. One of Yuri's most eye-catching artwork is *The Eye*, which he finger painted.

"He was inspired by French artist Victoria Renaux Abdoullaeva's *Indre Painting*. Yuri ran his fingers through a patch of paint on canvas. The centre of the painting features



Yuri's Purple Mosque is featured on Touch 'n Go cards.



Through his art, Yuri expresses his thoughts and emotions.

Over the past 10 years, Yuri has shown his works at three exhibitions – at the now defunct Art Case Gallery (2008), Maybank Art Festival (2010) and Borak Art Series (2017) in KL. The gifted artist has managed to sell 15 paintings, priced between RM3,000 and RM10,000. The money earned is kept in his savings.

Special needs children, including high functioning ones, need care and others to look after them. Dr Che An is happy her son is slowly learning to stand on his own two feet.

"There's nothing more rewarding than knowing Yuri is slowly being able to earn a small income as an artist."

"My husband and I are thrilled with his progress especially as he moves towards independence," says Dr Che An. Under Raja Azhar's tutelage, Yuri has painted about 70 acrylic works.

His art pieces are proudly displayed in his parents' home. Some are abstract works while others are inspired by nature, with subjects such as volcanic eruptions, plant life and forests.

Some paintings are on easels, neatly arranged around the TV room. One of Yuri's most eye-catching artwork is *The Eye*, which he finger painted.

"He was inspired by French artist Victoria Renaux Abdoullaeva's *Indre Painting*. Yuri ran his fingers through a patch of paint on canvas. The centre of the painting features

a freakish one-eye," explains his mother. Although her son may be labelled as disabled, Dr Che An doesn't see autism as a hindrance to Yuri's success.

"Each and every child with special needs has potential. It is a matter of finding out what they are good at and harnessing their skills."

"A large number of these children are kept at home as there aren't many suitable places to gain employment. Some work in sheltered employment. Organisations can do their part by reaching out to these special individuals," says Dr Che An, who hopes the government will conduct training programmes and establish conducive assisted living homes for people with special needs.

For now, Dr Che An is actively promoting and marketing Yuri's artworks. On his Instagram page (yuriazari autistic artist), they post on the merchandise available such as mugs, fridge magnets, drawstring bags and T-shirts featuring some of Yuri's designs.

"Part of the proceeds goes to Yuri. The money helps to fund his projects, including buying his art brushes, paints and canvas."

It is undoubtedly challenging for Dr Che An to juggle between work, Yuri's business and her family.

"Everything requires commitment and determination. Learning the nuts and bolts of running Yuri's business is a learning curve. Thankfully, my husband and children have been my pillar of



Award-winning artist Raja Azhar (right) has been perfecting Yuri's painting skills for a decade. — YURI ZAHARIN



Some of Yuri's work is abstract while others are inspired by nature, with subjects such as volcanic eruptions, plant life and forests.

Yuri's abstract art work, *Flash Fire* (left) and *The Flaming Chillies* are featured on Touch 'n Go pre-paid cards.

manage a small-scale business for her special son.

It is undoubtedly challenging for Dr Che An to juggle between work, Yuri's business and her family.

"Everything requires commitment and determination. Learning the nuts and bolts of running Yuri's business is a learning curve. Thankfully, my husband and children have been my pillar of

strength. My other children are helpful and always there to help their older brother."

She encourages parents of children with special needs to be resilient. Aim high and never give up on them.

"They will surprise you with their talents. Be strong and support them throughout the journey. Don't be shy to reach out for assistance."